

Thomas Hägg, Bo Utas, *The Virgin and Her Lover. Fragments of an Ancient Greek Novel and a Persian Epic Poem*, Brill Studies in Middle Eastern Literatures 30 (Leiden 2003). Pp. 278.*

At one time in Uppsala at the beginning of the eighties, two Swedish scholars, the orientalist (Iranist) Bo Utas and the classical philologist Thomas Hägg were discussing the possibility of a survival in the Islamic Orient of specimens of the Greek novel, Hägg's foremost area of expertise. Utas happened to be in possession of a then recent edition of some large fragments of a verse epic by the Persian Gaznavid court poet Abu'l-Qāsim 'Unṣurī (c. 970–1040), which for some reason took place in the Greek archipelago – the edition even included a map of the exotic settings.¹ Hägg could identify the source as the Greek novel *Metiochus and Parthenope*, some larger fragments of which had recently been put together by Herwig Maehler to form a continuous narrative.²

This discovery marked the beginning of a cooperation stretching over twenty years. Its major fruits were published in 2003, as the present book. The book is a splendid accomplishment of an extremely attractive project – a joint venture to collect fragments and testimonia from Greek, Persian and Arabic sources for an edition – of what exactly? 'Unṣurī's epic poem *Vāmiq u 'Adhrā*, which constitutes the core of the edition (ch. 3, pp. 80–133), is understandably not treated merely as a source for the Greek novel, but as a work of art in its own right – a highly accomplished one at that, to judge from the English prose translations attached to the Persian text. 'Unṣurī's poem is rightly given equal or even higher status than the scant Greek prose fragments that have survived – some of them possibly of an abbreviated version of the original novel (pp. 34, 189–190, 227, 252) – even supplying the edition

* I wish to thank my wife Tatiana Anatoljevna for assistance with Russian orthography and translations from an article by V. A. Sakhranov (below, nn. 3–4).

¹ M. Shafī (ed.), *Vāmiq-o-'Adhrā of 'Unṣurī* (Lahore 1967).

² H. Maehler, "Der Metiochus-Parthenope-Roman", *ZPE* 23 (1976) 1–20.

with its main title: *Vāmiq u 'Adhrā* means 'the (ardent) lover and the virgin'.

Other texts and artefacts are cited as testimonia, including a Christian Saint's Life preserved in Arabic, loosely based on the novel (pp. 65–75), and some beautiful floor mosaics from Roman Syria portraying its main characters (pp. 57–64). The present book contains the edition not of a text with fragments and testimonia in the standard manner as much as of an entire tradition; a roadmap to the transformations of a Greek novel through various cultures and languages in the East. The poem by 'Unşurī is as we said not the only, but also not the last stop on the way.

I have no contention with the overall quality of the work, but a few blemishes, mostly of a formal nature, will be noted in the course of the review.

In the Introduction (chapter one, pp. 1–22), Hägg and Utas (henceforth H&U) assess the research on the subject published to date. The Introduction consists of three sections; one concerned with the Greek novel; one with the Persian epic; and one with the joint study of the two. H&U summarize the major scholarly advances made before them, including earlier attempts to find a Greek source for 'Unşurī's poem. A number of Russian and Soviet scholars have made important contributions, including E. E. Bertel's, K. A. Chajkin, V. A. Sakhranov, and the Georgian Inga Kaladze, who in 1983 published a monograph on the subject, including a Russian translation of the entire remains, 415 verses, of 'Unşurī's poem.³ Sakhranov in fact already in 1972 argued (*op. cit.* [n. 3] 187–188) that *Vamiq u 'Adhrā* might be based on the Greek novel *Metiochus and Parthenope* – to the chagrin of the present authors, perhaps, since, while honestly accounting for Sakhranov's view (as referred by Kaladze, who opposed it) they claim not to have

³ И. Каладзе, *Эпическое наследие Унсури* [I. Keladze, *The Epic Heritage of 'Unşurī*] (Tbilisi 1983); Е. Э. Бертельс, "Стиль эпических поэм Унсури" [E. Bertels, "The Style of the Epic Poems by 'Unşurī"], *Доклады Академии Наук СССР*, ser. В, No. 3 (1929) 47–53; id., *История персидско-таджикской литературы* [A *History of the Perso-Tajik Literature*] (M. 1960) 239–240; 314–316; В. А. Сахранов, review of Shafi (*op. cit.* [n. 1]), *Народы Азии и Африки* 1 (1971) 218–219, "Персидская версия греческого романа" ("The Persian Version of a Greek Novel"), in: *Интернациональное и национальное в литературах востока* (M. 1972) 181–190. "Chajkin 1935", whom the authors cite on p. 12, is unfortunately absent from their bibliography.

been able to consult his work (p. 15, n. 33). It should not have been too difficult to order a copy of the article from, say, the Russian National Library in St. Petersburg, seeing especially that Bo Utas seems to be versant in Russian.⁴

A small matter; more serious, but no fault of the authors, is the fact that Bo Utas has not been allowed to inspect the original manuscript of ‘Unşuri’s poem (pp. 16–17, 77, 251), despite repeated entreaties to the estate of the late editors and owners, the Pakistani scholar Mohammad Shafī and his son, both today deceased. Hence Utas has had to work from the photographic facsimiles published in the *editio princeps* (n. 1).

On the Introduction follows an account for the Greek sources (chapter 2), including an edition, with translation and commentary, of the papyrus and ostrakon fragments (pp. 23–45) and a collection of testimonia with translation and commentary (pp. 45–56). The edition of the fragments is not based on fresh inspection of the primary evidence (p. 22), which has already been thoroughly studied by experts and published in several installations, the last of which appeared as recently as 2001.⁵ Hägg proposes a few new supplements, the most interesting and attractive of which is ἐφο[τνίχθη δὴ ... ὁ] Μητίοχος in fr. 1 (PBerol 9588 + 21 179 + 7927), col. II 36–37. The Greek testimonia include “testimonia proper to the novel” (*GT* 1 a–c), “testimonia to theatrical performances related to the novel” (*GT* 2 a–c) being three passages from Lucian, and “historical texts that presumably inspired the novelist” (*GT* 3 a–b) being a few passages from Herodotus which deals with, among

⁴ Bo Utas has published an article in Russian on the subject: “Изобретение барбата (По материалам поэмы Унсури ‘Вамик у Азра’)” (“The Invention of the Barbat. On Materials in ‘Unşuri’s Poem V&A’”), *Известия Академии Наук Таджикской ССР, серия востоковедение, история, филология*, 4/16 (1989 [1991]) 16–19. I have myself obtained a copy of Sakhranov’s 1972 article, admittedly aided by the advantage of being in place in St. Petersburg in person. Sakhranov argues well for the hypotheis from the evidence available to him, although he apparently puts too much faith in F. Z. Zimmerman’s over-confident supplements to the Greek fragments (*Griechische Roman-Papyri und verwandte Texte* [Heidelberg 1936]), now proven “massively wrong” (H&U p. 7, n. 16; Maehler [n. 2]). Sakhranov may have been the first scholar to direct attention to Polycrates’ court physican Democedes as a possible character featuring in the novel (Hdt. 3, 125; cf. H&U p. 36 n. 45, 56).

⁵ J. Alvares, T. Renner, “A New Fragment of the Metiochos and Parthenope Romance?”, in: I. Andorlini et al. (eds), *Atti del XXII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia (Firenze 23–29 agosto 1998)* I (Firenze 2001) 35–40 and pl. 1.

other things, the island Samos and the tyrant Polycrates, the setting of the beginning of the novel – Parthenope is taken to be Polycrates' daughter –, and Militades the younger and his son Metiochus. The passages from Herodotus are given in English translation only.

After the testimonia proper, the editors present and discuss two unorthodox sources (pp. 57–75), the first of which are two floor mosaics from Roman Syria, each depicting the hero and heroine of the novel, identified by Greek legends. For unstated reasons – reproduction rights? – only one of the mosaics features as an illustration in the book, unfortunately the less interesting one from our point of view. The mosaic which is not illustrated contains particularities of imagery which may have bearing on the narrative: Parthenope wears her hair short and Metiochus is armed and dressed in a military uniform, both of which features could refer to particular developments reported in the text and testimonia to the novel (pp. 59–60). The detailed discussion of the mosaics includes an (inconclusive) attempt to argue that one of them is an illustration from the original novel rather than from the theatrical performances mentioned by Lucian, also occurring, n. b., in the Syrian context (pp. 60–61).

The other “unorthodox” source is the *Martyrdom of St. Parthenope*, a Christian Saint's Life preserved in Arabic (and partly in Coptic), which Hägg in 1984 identified as being likely to be based on the narrative of the novel.⁶ The text is ranged among the “Greek sources”, as the authors argue that the original version was probably written in Greek, and is presented in an English translation by Utas, without the original Arabic text. In the passages where the Coptic version has been preserved, Utas' translation runs parallel with a translation from the Coptic by Richard Holton Pierce.

On the Greek sources follow the Persian ones (ch. 3), including, apart from the major manuscript, quotations from *Vāmiq u 'Adhrā* by Persian lexicographers and a prose narrative from a collection of stories about Darius III. For inscrutable reasons, the verbatim citations from the lexicographers are relegated to the testimonia rather than cited as fragments (pp. 149–183), while the prose narrative is given undetermined status as a “source” (pp. 144–149).

For natural reasons I will be briefer about the Persian material. However, the large fragments from 'Unṣurī's epic poem do contain the bulk of what we know about the Greek novel, and I cannot refrain from

⁶ “The *Parthenope Romance* Decapitated?”, *Symbolae Osloenses* 59 (1984) 61–92.

a few comments on the content. One of the most striking details is the appearance, highly uncommon in the Greek literary tradition and perhaps even rarer in the Islamic world, of a martial literary heroine, a shieldmaiden. At the beginning of the epic poem, ‘Adhrā’s (Parthenope’s) birth and education are depicted. The latter of which is early on directed towards the study of the martial arts (verses 31–32):

At ten years of age, she went to polo and ball;
 she turned her face to arrow and bow.
 – – [lacuna] – –
 With her spear she moved the mountain from its place;
 with her arrow she pierced steel.

‘Adhrā goes on to become commander-in-chief of her father’s army (vv. 38–39), and later passages show her valiantly engaged in battle, although the context remains unclear (vv. 348–352, 357–368[?]). Also interesting to note is that at the first chance meeting between the young lovers, *she* is the first to speak, boldly addressing the young man as “o lovely-faced, which such exalted looks and colour and scent” (v. 91), and that later on, ‘Adhrā is participating at a symposium, where she partakes in the intellectual discussion on equal foot with the men (vv. 168–179, Greek fragment 1, col. II, ll. 64–71).

As for the editors’ commentary, one cannot help but feeling a little disappointed by the editors’ lack of interest in this, in my opinion, remarkable phenomenon. The least one might have expected would have been a few parallels for the shieldmaiden character in Greek and Persian/Islamic literature, if at all extant.⁷ Only in chapter five, “Reconstruction of the plot”, do they dwell upon the matter, and in a secondary manner (pp. 218–219, esp. text for n. 4), in the course of trying to determine whether this is a feature of the original novel or one introduced by ‘Unşurī. However, I am unjustly criticising the lack of something which it has never been the editors’ intention to supply in the first place. In the last short chapter (ch. 6, pp. 251–253), “Problems and challenges”, H&U admit to their work’s character as sourcebook rather than in-depth study, and mention motif study as one line of inquiry which is left for future

⁷ One parallel, albeit a woman of recent divine lineage, is the nymph Cyrene, daughter of Hypseus, the grandson of Oceanus and Gaia and king of the Lapiths. In Pi. *P.* 9. 19–25, Cyrene is depicted as impatient with weaving and staying at home, instead hunting with sword and javelins. Apollo falls in love with her as he sees her wrestling a lion (9. 26–28).

scholars to pursue (p. 252). The commentaries of H&U are almost exclusively limited to strictly editorial-philological matters: editing, previous scholarship, reconstruction of plot, and *nachleben*.

The *nachleben* are treated of in chapter four, “Transformations of the text”. This includes an inquiry into the history of the Greek novel before it metamorphosed into ‘Unşurī’s Persian poem (pp. 188–203). The cautious but apparently soundly based conclusion is that ‘Unşurī’s work was based on a written Persian or Arabic intermediary, possibly a direct prose translation of the Greek novel (p. 201).

The *nachleben* of ‘Unşurī’s own work is also treated of in this chapter. A large number of poems and stories have been preserved in the Near East under the title *Vāmiq u ‘Adhrā*. Utas lists fifteen Persian and one Kashmiri work dating from the fifteenth to the nineteenth century (pp. 207–209), and mentions other, now lost works from earlier days (p. 202, text for nn. 29–30). Initially the authors claim that these are completely independent creations (pp. 12, 18, 203–212), but later (p. 253) they confess that it remains unclear to what extent most of them are based on, or influenced by, ‘Unşurī’s version.

One version which apparently *is* based on ‘Unşurī is given special consideration: the 3000 verses long Turkish poem by the famous Ottoman poet Maḥmūd Lāmi‘ī of Bursa (1472–1532), who has apparently produced a completely revamped lovestory out of ‘Unşurī’s poem – as he himself confesses in prefatorial verses—interchanging the role of hero and heroine (pp. 19, 204–207). The biographical information supplied about Lāmi‘ī is highly confused: his poem is first said to have been published in the seventeenth century (p. 19); his death is subsequently (p. 204) set to *anno Hijra* 1532 (AD 2154).

Chapter five, “Reconstruction of the plot” (pp. 213–250), attempts to take into account all the available evidence in order to present something approaching a continuous narrative. The discussion is sound and thorough, and Hägg makes profitable use of his expertise, adducing plots and details of the other extant Greek novels as comparative material. However, much, not to say most, remains highly uncertain, including the ending of the novel, which seems to have taken place on Samos but may have been either happy or tragic (pp. 249–250).

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